



Lucille Clifton

Biography

Lucille Clifton was born in Depew, New York. Named after her great-grandmother who, according to her father, was the first black woman to be legally hanged in the state of Virginia, she was raised with two half-sisters and a brother. Growing up, she recalls hearing the word ‘nigger’. She knew that it wasn’t her, and she thought, “‘Well, I’ll have to suspect everything they say, won’t I?’ And I’ve always been a very curious person, interested in a lot of things, and, so, in writing, I never thought I would be a poet” (Davis).

Clifton was awarded a scholarship to Howard University, becoming the first person in her family to finish high school and consider college, entering as a drama major. After two years she lost her scholarship and told her father, “I don’t need that stuff. I’m going to write poems. I can do what I want to do! I’m from Dahomey women!” It was at this point that Clifton’s writing began.

In a writer’s group she met a man named Ishmael Reed, who showed some of her poems to Langston Hughes. He was the first to publish Clifton, premiering her work in the anthology *Poetry of the Negro*. Her first complete book of poems, *Good Times*, was published in 1969. She has been twice nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Her first children’s book, *Some of the Days of Everett Anderson* (1970), launched her into writing children’s stories. Clifton was recently interviewed as part of “The Language of Life,” with Bill Moyers, a major video series exploring the American phenomenon of public poetry. She has been honored as Poet Laureate of Maryland, and currently teaches as a Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1936
- * African-American poet, novelist, and children’s book author

This page was researched and submitted by Angela Grischowsky, Heidi Hemmen, and Jason Schindler on 9/18/98 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 10/7/04.



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Lucille's poetry is straightforward and makes use of vernacular speech. Her poems contain compassion and a high level of emotion. Her African roots and her personal history have become the basis of her writing. Other common themes include family, death, birth, and religion. She says, "the proper subject matter for poetry is life" (Davis). She asserts that the reason to write poetry is to assert the importance of being human.

Selected Bibliography

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